

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355048583>

The Politics of “Queer Reading” an Ethiopian Saint and Discovering Precolonial Queer Africans

Article in *Journal of African Cultural Studies* · October 2021

DOI: 10.1080/13696815.2021.1975265?needAccess=true

CITATIONS

0

READS

131

1 author:



[Serawit Bekele Debele](#)

University of Bayreuth

29 PUBLICATIONS 20 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



of Carnal Desires [View project](#)



politics and rituals in contemporary Ethiopia [View project](#)



SHOUT
SHARE **IT**



The Politics of “Queer Reading” an Ethiopian Saint and Discovering Precolonial Queer Africans

Serawit Debele

To cite this article: Serawit Debele (2021): The Politics of “Queer Reading” an Ethiopian Saint and Discovering Precolonial Queer Africans, Journal of African Cultural Studies, DOI: [10.1080/13696815.2021.1975265](https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2021.1975265)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2021.1975265>



Published online: 04 Oct 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 21



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



The Politics of “Queer Reading” an Ethiopian Saint and Discovering Precolonial Queer Africans

Serawit Debele

Faculty of Humanities, University of Bayreuth, Bayreuth, Germany

ABSTRACT

This article asks what it means to discover Africans through our sexual desires, and how that might shape the way the West knows both women and queer people. I closely read Wendy Belcher’s interpretations of the sexual life of Wälättä Petros, a seventeenth-century Ethiopian female saint. While the article draws on postcolonial, African feminist and queer scholarship, it takes a cue from Saidiya Hartman’s “Venus in Two Acts” to raise speculative questions related to the opacity of the text. I argue that Belcher’s interpretation of carnal desire produces the saint as a hysterical subject, and attaches to the saint’s life the claim of discovering queer people in pre-colonial Africa. I argue that this interpretation assimilates the saint into our contemporary ideas of sexuality and thereby invents a modern subject through a reading that is divorced from historical and geographic specificities. The article also explores the benevolent intentions of discovering pre-colonial queer Africans for the cause of present-day struggles against persecution. It is not my intention here to discount the translation of the hagiography, nor is it to dispute the possibilities of reading same-sex intimacies. I am interested in thinking about the presentist preoccupations of the interpretation.

KEYWORDS

Walatta Petros; carnal desire; queer reading; queer Africans

These Benevolent Intentions ...

Do not discover us for us. Stop it. If you’re planning to say anything that starts with, “I discovered,” or “no one has ever done this before me,” or “I am the first to find this object here,” stop. Do not do it. You are wrong. Do not discover us for us. (Macharia 2015)

In 2015, Wendy Belcher and Michael Kleiner published their translation from Ge’ez, a classic Ethiopic language of a seventeenth-century hagiography of the Christian saint Walatta Petros an.¹ In the extended introduction to this translation (Belcher and Kleiner 2015) and later interpretative article (2016) Wendy Belcher takes upon herself the task of showcasing African women as having both intelligible and exciting stories and histories. This task is all the more important, Belcher argues, because many in the West assume that African women “have perennially been the most abused and repressed” (Belcher and Kleiner 2015, 3). According to Belcher, there is a need to amend this by showcasing the fascinating accounts of African women’s history of which the West has not heard. For example, places like North East Africa “have long traditions of strong ruling queens, of legally independent

and literate noblewomen, and of national reverence for female deities and saints” (Belcher and Kleiner 2015, 3). Despite the familiar condescending undertones, Belcher’s commitment can be celebrated as a commendable manifestation of global feminist solidarity: a case where the person with resources and access tells the story of the other who is on the margins of power and privilege. This commitment would have been welcome if only it were not tainted by ethnocentric universalism and lack of self-conscious reflection. First and foremost, the assumption that it will not be done “if I did not do it” echoes the well-known adage of Africa as a place of lack and absence. This makes benevolent intentions and their attendant practices contributors to the erasure and/or dismissal of African, and in particular female, researchers, whose recent proliferation has been remarked on by feminist scholars like Awino Okech (2020). Also, the act of introducing the saint and thereby African women to the English-speaking West assumes that the existence of African historical subjects is not enough in and of itself. African historical subjects, it would seem, can only get accreditation after being introduced to the West, and there is no one up to this task unless someone from the West does it. Nowhere is this stated as clearly as in the preface of the book where Belcher writes: “How could word about the deeds of this amazing woman spread if I did not get this text translated into English?” (Belcher and Kleiner 2015, xxii). Now, extending such benevolence through which African women are introduced into the realm of legibility as a condition for legitimation is an example of knowledge production that centres on re-presenting the “Other”. Speaking for the forgotten subject, the benevolent researcher “discovers” an archive. One then wonders: what is at stake in translating and editing this hagiography “with a careful eye for the needs of undergraduates and scholars who have no knowledge of Ethiopia or Geez” (Belcher and Kleiner 2015, 2)? When we have a specific audience in mind who is both Western and intent on discovering, what are the conditions for knowledge production about the Other? What do such practices tell us about ways of knowing, and the conditions of legibility for the ones yet-to-be-known, and also who the knower is? What are the consequences of such practices on the subject under consideration – in this case, women, queer subjects and Africa?² To speculate on these questions, I will dwell on Belcher’s interpretive article “Same Sex Intimacies in the Early African Text Gädlä Wälättä Petros (1672): Queer Reading an Ethiopian Woman Saint” published in *Research in African Literatures* in 2016.

Before I move on, two disclaimers. First, I need to announce that my intention in writing this is not one of gatekeeping, but of questioning what Gayatri Spivak (1988) calls intellectual transparency embedded in claims of the outsider’s objectivity. I take a cue from the Oromo feminist scholar Martha Kuwe Kumsa’s (2020) to call out and to call in. Here to call out is to point out the epistemic violence committed by the knower who is “masquerading as absent nonrepresenter who lets the [Other] speak for themselves” (Spivak 1988, 87). It also means to scrutinise the problem underlying the self-acclaimed innocence with which some of our Western colleagues make their claims. To call in is to recognise the issue as part of the broader historic and structural problems with knowledge production, in which I as the insider am also implicated. It also means to invite others to study and think together: to engage in a conversation, at times uncomfortable, that approaches all points of views with the deserved respect and seriousness holding us all equally accountable. This would mean, in Sara Ahmed’s words, “accepting the limits of the knowledge that one has already claimed” (Ahmed 2000, 64). Thus, I raise questions that demand serious deliberations, questions that are not to be dismissed as a

homophobically motivated silencing by yet another local scholar.³ This does not necessarily presuppose a claim that I myself would have done a better job and thereby flaunting what Paul Gilroy (1993) calls “cultural insiderism”. I do not position myself as an authority by virtue of being an insider, and thus better able to represent the saint or queer Africans. I am aware that I am as far removed in time, if not in space, as Belcher from the stories whose interpretations I am contesting here. In the spirit of Ahmed’s plea about accepting limits, I also call myself in, and out, to say my critique is not motivated by proving a particular scholar wrong or right.

This work mainly relies on Belcher’s interpretative article published in 2016 and analyses the 2015 translation to substantiate some of my arguments and observations. This means that I do not set out to dispute the translation. Whether we agree with their positions or not, that has already been done by other Ethiopian scholars such as Woldeyes (2020) who makes a case that there is a mistranslation of some words. I also do not dismiss Belcher’s reading of same-sex intimacies in the text, but I have issues with her interpretations for reasons other than saying the text offers no hint to study non-normative desires. I engage with Belcher’s work to ask what the ethics of writing histories of the present might entail as well as how we might deal with the past in a way that respects the unknowable, or those who cannot speak back. In “Venus in Two Acts”, Saidyia Hartman (2008) reflects on what stories afford us. She ponders: might stories afford us a “way of living in the world in the aftermath of catastrophe and devastation? A home in the world for the mutilated and violated self? For whom – for us or for them?” I raise similar questions about the project of engaging with the past in the interest of “helping” queer subjects in today’s Africa. How, I ask, might we tell the stories of saints and “the purchase or claim of their lives on the present-without committing further violence in [our] act of narration?” (Hartman 2008, 2–3).

The article is structured into three parts. In the first, I briefly introduce the saint, following it with sharing my thoughts on Belcher’s interpretations to show the production of the saint as a subject of hysteria. I then engage with claims embedded in “discovering” new evidence about the existence of queer Africans before colonialism. Before I conclude, I discuss the methodological implications of the work in the context of current debates within Ethiopian/African Studies.

Wälättä Petros in a Few Words

Wälättä Petros was a noblewoman born in 1592 in the Abyssinian Christian kingdom of present-day Ethiopia. She got married around the age of 16 to a fellow nobleman and gave birth to three boys, all of whom died at infancy. Wälättä Petros was a very devout Christian woman who spent most of her youth learning the ways of Orthodox Christianity. Her ascension to sainthood which granted her a hagiography necessitates an understanding of the socio-political and religious context in which she lived. In the early seventeenth century, the Jesuit missionaries came to Abyssinia and began converting the nobility to Catholicism. Their Catholic faith was endorsed by the king himself who declared it as the official religion in the kingdom. He also ordered a forced conversion of his subjects from Orthodox to Catholic Christianity. Walatta Petros’s husband was one of those in charge of overseeing this forceful conversion. She fiercely resisted this imposition and despised her husband for being part of the new religion. She decided to leave him and

to join those who waged a resistance against the mass conversion. The history of her struggle and her trajectory to sainthood begins at this historical moment. At the age of 24, she became a nun and started leading a monastic life. She also started mobilising both ordinary subjects and churchmen against the Catholics. The king heard the news and summoned her to the palace where she was asked to give up what she was doing, convert to Catholicism and to reunite with her husband. Wälättä Petros refused and stated her refusal fearlessly. She went into exile and settled in a monastery where she began creating a monastic community. In 1622, the notorious king was succeeded by his son who took over following the militant resistance that turned into a civil war. The new king restored Orthodox Christianity as the official religion. However, Wälättä Petros did not return home, opting instead to continue her monastic life which “gave her the philosophy, language and space to bring many people together” (Woldeyes 2020, 139). Monasticism also became central to her eventual elevation to sainthood. She created seven monastic communities which she led until her death in 1642.

Thirty years after her passing, a learned man called Gelawdewos wrote her hagiography. He gathered information from those who were members of the monastic communities she looked after. In 2015, the first translation of this text into English was published by Princeton University Press. Wendy Laura Belcher and Michael Kleiner co-translated and co-edited the book as *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros: A Seventeenth-Century African Biography of an Ethiopian Woman*. The book is a translation of “currently the oldest and book-length biography of an African woman written by Africans about an African woman” (Belcher and Kleiner 2015, 30). It is, Belcher continues, “an extraordinary true story about early modern African women’s lives, leadership, and passions – two hundred pages of vivid dialogue, heartbreak, and triumph” (2015, xxii). Apart from some bold truth claims, here begins the “hyperbolic admiration”, a phrase Spivak (1988, 93) uses to describe the extreme fascination that informs the relationship between the first world intellectual as the knowing subject and her object of investigation located elsewhere. The scholar’s fascination with a black African woman is central to the way the intended Western audience is introduced to the saint as an exciting discovery of a recognisable Other (though distant both in time and space). Indeed Belcher rightly notes that the hagiography theorises women’s agency in a radical way. African women are presented as powerful actors playing extraordinary roles. Above all, and this is where the author claims to have “discovered” something groundbreaking in the study of African sexuality, the hagiography “challenges facile ideas about the traditional African family and sexuality” (Belcher and Kleiner 2015, 39). The editorial note to the book later gives rise to the 2016 article in which Belcher foregrounds the saint as a same-sex desiring woman who had intimate relations with another nun. I focus on this later interpretive article to explore Belcher’s queer reading of the saint.

The Search for Same-Sex Desiring Women

The author has the following to write in summing up the life of the saint:

We might say that Wälättä Petros’s life as a nun began and ended with two sights, both of women. The first was seeing Eḥatä Krastos [her partner] for the first time, when Wälättä

Peṭros's heart was infused with love and she was 'united' with a woman by God. The last was seeing the same-sex desiring nuns, when Wälättä Peṭros's heart caught fire and she asked God to unite them in death. (Belcher 2016, 37)

Contrary to the promise she makes in the introduction to the translated hagiography, namely of acquainting her Western readers with an extraordinary African woman, in the article Belcher ends up minimising the saint's journey to one that revolved around the management of her intimate life. Women's presence in the saint's life is read only as symptomatic of sexual desire. Belcher draws on a queer Ethiopian person's suppositions about the two scenes and postulates

the first sight as one of instantiation, where Wälättä Peṭros's identity as a same-sex partner flames into being, and the second sight as one of recognition, when Wälättä Peṭros consciously realizes her desires. Living without visual representations of human relations, as people then did, the only mirror for her own behavior was that of others. (Belcher 2016, 37)

I analyse below these scenes of instantiation and recognition.

Carnal Scene 1 – Instantiation

Belcher argues that Wälättä Petros had a lifelong female partner called Eḥətä Krəstos. The story of their meeting is one we might call love at first sight, as they both liked one another right from their first encounter. The two lived together like a married couple ordained by a priest but had "severely repressed all desires of the body" (Belcher 2016, 28). According to Belcher, the authors of the hagiography allude to a binding "marriage vow" when they speak of the nuns' relationship. That is why, even when they were physically apart, they "were never separated in their hearts" (Belcher 2016, 27). When they were not together, it was always difficult, particularly for Eḥətä Krəstos who expressed her emotional distress on several occasions. However, instead of motherhood and/or sisterhood as the basis of inseparability, Belcher prefers life long partnership with repressed carnal desire as a lens through which to read their intimacy and the language with which the two women describe the pain inflicted by separation. Belcher conveniently leaves out Eḥətä Krəstos's plea to rejoin the woman she calls her mother and eroticises the nun's reaction when they reunite. Ironically, in the hagiography, we read that Eḥətä Krəstos weeps because "[I have] been separated from my mother Wälättä Peṭros and made to remain behind alone. So, I beg you now ... to dispatch me so that I can go to my mother" (Belcher and Kleiner 2015, 164). One wonders why Eḥətä Krəstos's own description of her relationship with Wälättä Petros is disregarded. To whom is this line of interpretation interesting? To the scholar's predetermined project? To queer Africans? To our understanding of historical subjects in Africa? How do we account for our positions as scholars far removed both in time and space from where the monastic life took shape and the intimacy was experienced?

Belcher's interpretation of the women's intimacy reminds us of a romantic movie one would have loved to watch (or has already watched) about such a great couple. Through translating the women into what is familiar to the scholar's sensibilities, new identities are invented. This makes certain incommensurate experiences and practices accessible to the researcher's intellectual formation. Accordingly, an identity is ascribed to the women as "same sex desirers". The reification of their identity as same-sex desirers shatters all

other ways of knowing desire and intimacy in their fluidity and situatedness. Even Wälättä Petros's sexual experience with her husband is construed as an undesirable memory and any semblance of a heterosexual encounter triggers a post-traumatic stress syndrome (Belcher 2016). So regardless of what they have to say about their relationship, the two women are now known to us as same-sex desiring women. This makes us wonder about whose context, position and desires are made prominent. Are we yet again reaffirming the central position of the Western author as agentic while denying the other their subject position? One could read Belcher's desire to see the two women's relationship as erotic, and not filial, care as an effort to recuperate women's sexualities against a history that makes them invisible. However, this reading is not faithful to the text, and in fact does something less benevolent, and more self-serving. Again, following Hartman (2008), I ask: how might these stories have been written in a way that is more respectable to the saints? How might we have thought of representing them more ethically, by taking seriously what they have to say about their relationship (note the text-interpretation fracture)? Would it have been more productive to think with Eḥātä Krastos's plea to join her "mother" instead of ignoring it? How might we theorise intimacy in history and what might we have retained as an inspiration from the life of the saints? What could we have learnt from their stories about vulnerability and sticking up for each other? Couldn't filial intimacies be queer(ed)?

Carnal Scene 2 – Recognition

If Wälättä Petros was struggling with a lack of clarity about her desire for women, it becomes clear to her, according to Belcher's reading, from her own reaction upon witnessing "lustful nuns" flirting, a scene that makes the saint burn with desire. The author, her audience and Wälättä Petros herself recognise the saint as a woman desiring women through this encounter. This sexually charged scene is presented as defining Wälättä Petros's self-knowledge as a same-sex desiring woman because if the saint

had been kissing, caressing, and pressing against [her lifelong partner], she may have thought nothing of it until she saw other women doing the same. The reason the saint had such an intense affective response ... is because her own behavior had been illuminated. She suddenly knew herself as a woman who wanted women, who had been in denial about what she was doing, and who was terrified. (Belcher 2016, 37)

Ironically, the saint abhors this moment for what it has revealed. In fact, she becomes angry at both herself and God for "feeling desire upon looking at the scene. That is, seeing women being sexual with one another made her heart burn with desire. Just as in English, the metaphor of 'burning' can express anger or lust and the author(s) may be taking advantage of this double meaning" (2016, 34). Her visceral reaction is construed as confirmatory of what she has been struggling to admit even though she already has a romantic relationship with the partner Belcher assigns her. That moment of self-knowledge is also the moment when the saint is produced as a recognisable subject via her hysteric reactions. In this way, Belcher's analysis assimilates Wälättä Petros to Western theoretical registers. The saint was unsure of her desires until she saw other women doing what she had either been refraining from doing or had been doing with her female partner. She is suddenly made conscious of and reacts aggressively to her own

desire upon looking at the nuns. In Belcher's reading, Wälättä Petros becomes a subject of hysteria, opening the saint's womanhood and her sexuality to a Freudian analysis of displaying excessive emotions. This interpretive practice by which Wälättä Petros is introduced to the intended audience echoes what Spivak (1988) calls an act of recognition by assimilation. To recognise the African woman requires assimilating her into Western methodological and theoretical registers. In this way, a transhistorical woman is produced in which all of us become the same, with no regard to historic and geographic specificities.

Womanhood gets produced discursively as a monolithic category irrespective of the differences in material conditions that shape formations of subjectivities across time and space.⁴ For example, as Belcher herself notes, Wälättä Petros is a product of a "period of religious struggle" in which women played major roles defending their Ethiopian Orthodox Christian religion from forceful conversion to Catholicism. These women were up against worldly authorities who threatened to change the existing religious landscape. And following the end of the civil strife, Wälättä Petros continued leading the monastic communities she had founded. While this is a very crucial context for our understanding of the hagiography as a socio-politically situated struggle, it is baffling to read Belcher offering an extremely narrow definition of struggle, to mean fighting temptations. After passing through the rites of passage to become a nun, Belcher writes in the introduction to the hagiography one began a "life of gädl (struggle) to resist temptation, the most dangerous of which was thought to be the desire for sex" (2015, 16). She asserts this further in the article by saying "hagiography can only be a struggle against temptation" (Belcher 2016, 34). This perpetuates, to quote Yirga, "colonialism's stereotypical construction of black women's sexuality as an expression of a state of nature in which pre-modern people struggle with their violent and lascivious sexual drives.... Wallata Petros is invented as a black [woman] who desires her publicly lustful young nuns" (Woldeyes 2020, 152) and thereby risks losing the fight against temptation. This centres sexuality as the means to understanding womanhood – leaving aside political or religious affiliations and practices, as well as identities.

Now, for Belcher, this short episode of the nuns flirting is paramount to our understanding of the saint's sexual life and an important contribution to the study of African sexualities. Belcher tells us that what has been incomplete becomes fuller now, by reading this moment back into the history of the two women's relationship. If Belcher has been unsure (which she is not) about their sexual relationship, this fills that gap the hagiography leaves in narrating the women. One wonders, however, if the saint was angry because she discovered herself as a same-sex desiring woman. Or could it have been that as an abbess she finds what is regarded as a sinful scene (not necessarily because it is between women) outrageous and calls for God's intervention to help her make amends? How far can our speculations go in search of closure to make the story of the two women's relationship complete? Would the saint's representation, instead of giving us a woman hysteric, have been more complex if Belcher exercised what Hartman calls "narrative restraint", to resist the urge "to fill the gap and provide closure" by all means? How much can we demand of the saint's desire to make sense of contemporary lives? Or is it acceptable to demand more than their stories could afford us, simply because we have a noble cause to fight for?

What is Noble in Discovering Wälättä Petros for Queer Africans?

By now, it should be obvious that Belcher perceives her task as being the speaker for both women and queer communities in Africa. Based on her interpretations, she hopes to contribute to the struggle against the persecution of queer Africans. I do not take issue with this. I recognise Belcher's effort to write queer Ethiopians into empire's history, although her writing risks depicting them not as historical subjects but as victims of God's wrath (though I should note that this comes with a reassuring note that queer people are not more sinful than their heterosexual counterparts). I think it is a step towards recovering what seem to be impossible histories. That said, I take issue with the interpretations. For example, it should be noted that celebrating the discovery of evidence about existence conflates discourses on sexuality as a colonial import with lived experiences, practices and realities. What is dangerous is that the scholar here implies that homophobia has its roots in Africans' ignorance of their own history, while conveniently sidelining the colonial histories and contemporary practices such as those of US-based evangelical groups that sponsor anti-queer movements on the continent, including in Ethiopia. This is a counterproductive assertion, I believe, because it selectively defines Africans as homophobic and assigns to the Western intellectual the task of educating that homophobia out of their system. The problems queer people in Africa face may not be solved, however, by excavating evidence that confirms the presence of same-sex desirers before colonialism. The injustices queer subjects suffer cannot be resolved outside of questions about global capital and (post/neo)colonial imperial relations. But above all, such a claim of new evidence overlooks the fact that pleasures sought in non-normative ways are a "social fact", the existence of which we do not need to prove with archival evidence.⁵ What this discovery seems to do is reproduce the tradition of presenting non-white queer subjects as additives that are often relegated to a "footnote" or a "see for example", as Sandra Soto (2005) astutely describes it.

To "queer read" as suggested by Soto (2005) is to go beyond showing any evidence demonstrating the porosity of heteronormativity and the complexity of desire. One wonders what would have changed if the "queer reading" was less about showing evidence but more about exploring the contradictory, complex and dynamic ways in which desire and intimacy unfold in the said time. What if, beyond "real discovery", queer reading is practised, to quote Soto again (2005, 239), to "lead to a consideration of where and how these processes are attenuated and where and how they denaturalize normativity"? What if we take queer reading as a political act of appropriating normative texts and infusing them with new meanings that unsettle the taken-for-granted-ness of heteronormativity. Otherwise, as my friend and interlocutor Baheru Shewaye once asked, "what business does a queer Ethiopian have in showing that we existed five hundred years ago if we still fight for basic access to health facilities? We obviously existed!" It is not history that he rejects, but the danger of narrowing down the causes for social struggle to showing "we were there".⁶

Let me come back to Hartman (2008, 10) and ask what it means "to think historically about matters still contested in the present" beyond presenting the object of discovery within a self-congratulatory framework of *look what I found in Africa*. Would digging for evidence suffice or could we have imagined freedom differently – thinking of a life lived with no sin and judgment for desiring differently? In many ways, Belcher's efforts

of reading for same-sex intimacies in a sacred text is crucial in uncovering silenced stories. In this well-meaning attempt, however, the scholar risks sacrificing a complex historical subject that is Wälättä Petros by reducing the richness of her struggles to fighting sexual temptations. Belcher herself would agree that the saint has a history whose relationship with other women is irreducible simply to carnal motives.⁷ However, as Spielman (2018) notes, much less is said about gender and sexuality as well as how other relations unfold both within and outside of the monastic confines during the time period. By narrowly presenting the saint and novice nuns as evidence, it is the discoverer that we see where visibility equals advancing career. Before I conclude, I want to come back to Belcher's introduction to the hagiography which laid the foundation for the interpretive article, in order to raise some methodological questions.

Of Distance and Objectivity

Writing about what "yielded a real discovery [of] the earliest anecdote we know of in which African women express desire for other women", Belcher asserts the collaborative nature of the work of translating the hagiography: involving both local and foreign stakeholders (Belcher and Kleiner 2015, xxxi). Some collaborators are mentioned by name while others are not. In what reads as an iteration of intellectual transparency, we are already confronted with a methodological impasse. Early in the preface, we are introduced to two categories of informants based on their "distance" from the subject of investigation. On the one hand are the legitimate "native informants for the first world intellectuals interested in [a particular] voice of the Other" (Spivak 1988, 79), and on the other are insiders who get dismissed because they are too invested emotionally to deal with sensitive issues like same-sex intimacies. The scholar is the ultimate arbiter of what passes as a legitimate viewpoint and what does not situating herself as "the objective judge" to echo Woldeyes's (2020) assessment. Belcher's own account of a particular encounter is illuminating. As the translation was progressing, Belcher and Kleiner came across

a perplexing anecdote about a number of community members dying because some nuns had pushed each other around. One word in the passage was a bit off In a terrific intuitive leap based on the phrase's philology, Michael [Kleiner] speculated that the nuns were not fighting but flirting with each other I decided to ask various experts what they thought of the passage while I was in Ethiopia. Before we got started, however, Selamawit warned me that if I told traditional Ethiopian scholars what I thought the anecdote actually said, they would just politely agree with me, telling me what I wanted to hear. Or, given the sensitivity of the issue of same-sex desire in Ethiopia, my mere presence as an American might skew the answer. I was grateful for her impeccable field methodology. So she and I parted and asked Ethiopian scholars about the passage without hinting at our own thoughts. [All of those consulted] said that the two nuns were not pushing each other around but following each other in a game, being frivolous. Sound philological principles backed their understanding of the passage, but playing tag hardly seemed to warrant a deadly disease. Selamawit recommended we approach a different type of scholar, a young former monk for whom she had tremendous respect. Ḥaylā Ṣəyon had grown up in the Twaḥədo church but had left it, so he had the scholarly background necessary to read the anecdote with skill but also the distance to read it openly. Ḥaylā Ṣəyon took one look at the anecdote and immediately said that it was about same-sex desire. (Belcher and Kleiner 2015, xxx)

The “impeccable field methodology” Selamawit injected to access the field is arguably a manifestation of how a racially coded language of objectivity works. The metaphor of distance bestowed upon Ḥaylā Şəyon echoes what Ellen Centime Zeleke (2020) calls a “technology of silence”, a technology embedded in the history of African Studies and which determines whose voices are worthy of consideration (Fujii 2020). The church scholars were conceived of as having no mind of their own other than echoing what they think the foreign scholar wants to hear. Alternatively, they are not trustworthy as they might just offer a skewed answer, due to the sensitivity of the issue. Though they are consulted for their comment, their response is simply dismissed in the interest of the scholar’s commitment. Belcher refuses room for interpretations that did not align with her conclusions, even while admitting that theirs is another plausible interpretation. She selectively relies on Kleiner’s speculations and on the views of native informants who reinforce her reading because they have the appropriate skill and distance from the church.⁸ This selective amplification of sources and voices has its roots in the raced and gendered conception of the US-based Association of African Studies. The association, on the basis of supposed objectivity, depicts white Americans as detached, neutral and objective scholars who can legitimately produce knowledge on Africa (Allman 2018). What we witness here is an extension of that problematic relationship, working in such a way as to selectively appropriate voices that match one’s political and theoretical commitment. The author shuns plurality of interpretation by subordinating voices that potentially counter her desired reading. Such decisions are a manifestation of continued removal of what is deemed illegible to the epistemic community to which the knower belongs. This stands in sharp contrast to Jean Allman’s call for white American colleagues not just to move the chairs to create room for non-white scholars but, in fact, to step aside. Allman’s plea to “step aside” comes a few years after the interpretation of the hagiography (Allman 2020). But it is certainly a reflection of an ongoing debate since the 1960s within the association’s circles as to what constitutes a legitimate researcher and on the basis of what that is determined – as Amina Mama (2007) highlighted in an earlier publication. So Allman’s call is not unknown to our colleagues in the global North but something that has been ignored, or refashioned as “collaboration”⁹ with local scholars as is evidenced in Belcher’s own writings. Calling out what is called objective and ethical, which basically is a technology of silencing, becomes all the more pressing and urgent in light of debates within the US African Studies Association and the exoticising traditions within some circles in Ethiopian Studies.

The opinions of “traditional” church scholars are voices that refuse to be integrated with the author’s predetermined reading, because they complicate or challenge what is about to be established as the scholar’s new findings. Yet, what becomes of archives as affording us discovery, given that the hagiography itself is written many years after the passing of the saint and that an argument can be made that it is itself speculative? As a hagiography, it is not an account of events as they really happened. Would it have been more fruitful, then, to engage with a speculative text in a way that permits other interpretations such as those of the church scholars? What possibilities would have opened in helping us think about the past, the now and the future? Sophia Dege-Müller (2017, 347), observes that “Belcher unfortunately reduced the noteworthiness of the text to the mention of same-sex desire included in a short episode of Petros’s hagiography.” This has hugely affected the reception of the translation of the hagiography in

Ethiopia. Michael Kleiner's (2020) response to Yirga's criticism captures the reception of the book's invaluable contribution to other fields as well. He writes

Authors tend to have little say in the reception of their publications: *habent sua fata libelli*, as the Romans said. Nonetheless, I would like to express my dismay that so far at least, the reception of our *Gädlä Wälättä Petros* translation has focused virtually exclusively on sexual aspects of the text. Certainly, sensuality and sexuality are relevant dimensions of the narrative – since they are of human life – and as such they deserve to be debated. Yet the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros* also touches on many other aspects of seventeenth-century Christian Ethiopian life and history that are worthy of study. In the interest of a more comprehensive and balanced reception of our translation, I hope that they too will receive their due share of attention in the future.¹⁰

If the hagiography was treated with regard for its opacity, would its reception (which is at times outright dismissal) in Ethiopian(ist) circles have been different?

Conclusion

What Jack Halberstam (2014) calls “the coloniality of the present” might help us understand Belcher's work in context. Coloniality of the present is a practice that “voraciously seizes upon old representations and reads them back through the most recent presentation”. In a lecture titled “On Behalf of Failure”, Halberstam laments that “to read a story about a seventeenth century hermaphrodite through the lens of contemporary transphobia is what I would call the coloniality of the present”. This presentist preoccupation – of updating the past from the viewpoint of the present, and thereby reflecting contemporary concerns, is pervasive in the interpretation of the life of the saint, her relationships with other nuns as well as her reactions upon seeing the nuns' acts of physical intimacy. Apart from projecting the present onto the past, Belcher becomes oblivious of what Nkiru Nzegwu (2010, 2) calls the enduring nature of “sexual norms and criteria” that are rooted in African cultures. Instead, she falls prey to what Nzegwu criticises, namely the assumption that African eroticism can be understood using contemporary Western sexual ontology. However, such a heavy reliance on “ideas [vocabularies] and practices that are heavily informed by Western erotic activities would not count as African eroticism” (Nkiru Nzegwu 2010, 2). Rather, through these universalising discourses, Belcher produces a woman, arbitrarily constructed and authorised by Western representational models. There is an obvious disconnect between Wälättä Petros as a historical subject and the saint as interpreted through the prisms of Western scholarship. Belcher's claim to have found the saint and unearthed the workings of her carnal desires is akin to the colonial/empire's obsession with calling everything a “discovery” if it is something that has been unknown to it until first exposure.¹¹ Needless to say, Wälättä Petros is not a discovery as far as members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church are concerned. Today, the hagiography circulates in both Amharic and Ge'ez languages as a prayer book and is used by many adherents of the church. The saint is perpetually present and intercedes, or so believe her followers. Similarly, there is nothing extraordinary about the existence of queer Africans in precolonial times. While subjects with complex and ever-shifting non-normative desires cannot be an object of discovery, Belcher maintains the usual place queer Africans are assigned: to act as “data” or “evidence”. In a way, she proves Keguro Macharia's (2016, 185) lamentations that queer subjects are articulated

“not as modes of theory or as challenges to the conceptual assumptions that drive queer studies”. “Even now”, he continues, “an army of well-meaning European and US researchers descend on Africa with notebooks and digital recorders to capture the belated entry of Africans into queer modernity”. Yet again, Wälättä Petros carries African women and queer subjects towards “queer modernity”, invited by the foreign researcher into an already existing framework – not to challenge or disrupt but to affirm through assimilation.

Notes

1. Except when quoting other works, I use this spelling of the saint’s name as presented by the translators of the hagiography. Additionally, unless stated otherwise, Christianity refers to Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity.
2. These questions draw on what Awino Okech (2020, 316) calls “foundational feminist epistemic questions: who knows? How do you know that you know? And, how are those knowledges accessed, circulated and enabled to thrive to the benefit of the community?”.
3. The typical response goes something like: Ethiopians are not ready to have such conversations yet and this assumption has been useful in shying away from serious deliberations on what this work might mean in shaping knowledge about Ethiopia and Africa at large. Even in casual conversations, I know the challenge of trying to explain the various ways intimacy works in Ethiopian society is difficult without being accused of being a homophobe or cultural essentialist.
4. Belcher loses sight of feminist scholarly critiques such as those by Chandra Mohanty (1988) about the dangers of representational scholarship and homogenising categories.
5. But if evidence were necessary, there are prior documents such as the Feteha Negest, a thirteenth-century document that legislated sexual practices within the Christian kingdom. If same-sex sexual practices did not exist, there was no need for legislating them (Debele 2020).
6. Bahiru Shewaye. Personal communication, Bayreuth/London, February 18, 2021.
7. In the face of sisterhood and motherhood as major tropes of the hagiography, Belcher inserts “partner” – a contemporary lexicon popular among same sex desirers in the West – to refer to the relationship of the two nuns (for more on debates on usage of words across time and space, see Ruth Vanta (2002).
8. Woldeyes (2020) deals with this in more detail.
9. This refashioned collaboration is something similar to what Carli Coetzee (2019, 258) describes as “a self-satisfied sense that one’s actions are ethical” as if the relationships are harmonious and characterised by continuity.
10. From the rejoinder by Kleiner to Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes, available here <https://wendybelcher.com/african-literature/walatta-petros-kleiner/>.
11. Awino Okech (2020, 317) highlights that discovery is a colonial and neocolonial legacy that renders some knowledges invisible and uses the word “idiocy” to refer to the claim foreigners make to refer to their encounter as discovery.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

Ahmed, Sara. 2000. “Who Knows? Knowing Strangers and Strangerness.” *Australian Feminist Studies* 15 (31): 49–68.

- Allman, Jean. 2018. "#HerskovitsMustFall: A Meditation on Whiteness, African Studies and the Unfinished Business of 1968." *African Studies Review* 62 (3): 6–39.
- Allman, Jean. 2020. "Academic Reparation and Stepping Aside." *Africa Is a Country*. <https://africasacountry.com/2020/11/academic-reparation-and-stepping-aside>.
- Belcher, L. Wendy. 2016. "Same Sex Intimacies in the Early African Text Gädlä Wälättä Petros (1672): Queer Reading an Ethiopian Woman Saint." *Research in African Literatures* 47 (2): 20–45.
- Belcher, Wendy Laura and Michael Kleiner (eds). 2015. *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros. A Seventeenth-century African Biography of an Ethiopian Woman* by Gälawdewos. Translated and Edited by Wendy Laura Belcher and Michael Kleiner. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Coetzee, Carli. 2019. "Ethical?! Collaboration?! Keywords for Our Contradictory Times." *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 31 (3): 257–264.
- Debele, Serawit B. 2020. "Of Taming Carnal Desire: The Imperial Roots of Legal Provisions Regulating Sexual Practices in Ethiopia." *History of the Present* 1 (10): 84–100.
- Dege-Müller, Sophia. 2017. "Review: The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros: A Seventeenth-Century African Biography of an Ethiopian Woman. By Galawdewos. Translated and Edited by Wendy Laura Belcher and Michael Kleiner." *Journal of African History* 58 (2): 346–347.
- Fujii, George. 2020. "H-Diplo Roundtable XXII-3 on Zeleke. 'Ethiopia in Theory: Revolution and Knowledge Production, 1964–2016'." HDiplo.
- Gilroy, Paul. 1993. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Verso.
- Halberstam, Jack. 2014. "On Behalf of Failure." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZP086r_d4fc.
- Hartman, Saidiya. 2008. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe* 26: 1–14.
- Kleiner, Michael. 2020. "Considered Translations Reconsidered. A Rejoinder to Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes's Criticisms of Our Allegedly 'Sexualizing' Translations in The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros (2015)", <https://wendybelcher.com/african-literature/walatta-petros-kleiner/>.
- Kumsa, Martha Kuwe. 2020. "Waiting for Gadaa: A Critical Exploration Through Transnational Siinquee Feminism." *Critical African Studies* 12 (1): 121–134.
- Macharia, Keguro. 2015. "Visiting Africa: A Short Guide for Researchers." <https://thenewinquiry.com/blog/visiting-africa-a-short-guide-for-researchers/>.
- Macharia, Keguro. 2016. "On Being Area-Studied: A Litany of Complaint." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 22 (2): 183–189.
- Mama, Amina. 2007. "Is It Ethical to Study Africa? Preliminary Thoughts on Scholarship and Freedom." *African Studies Review* 50 (1): 1–26.
- Mohanty, Chandra. 1988. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Feminist Review* 30: 61–88.
- Nzegwu, Nkiru. 2010. "'Osunality,' or African Sensuality-Sexuality: Going Beyond Eroticism." *JENdA: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies* 16: 1–24.
- Okech, Awino. 2020. "African Feminist Epistemic Communities and Decoloniality." *Critical African Studies* 12 (3): 313–329.
- Soto, Sandra K. 2005. "Cherrie Moraga's Going Brown 'Reading Like a Queer'." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 11 (2): 237–263.
- Spielman, David B. 2018. "Review: Gälawdewos, *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros: A Seventeenth Century African Biography of an Ethiopian Woman*. Translated and Edited by Wendy Belcher and Michael Kleiner." *Ufahamu* 40 (1): 544.
- Spivak, Gayatri. 1988. "Can the Subaltern Speak." In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 271–313. Basingstoke: Macmillan Education.
- Vanta, Ruth. 2002. *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*. New York: Routledge.
- Woldeyes, Yirga Gelaw. 2020. "Colonial Rewrite of African History Misrepresentations and Distortions in Belcher and Kleiner's *Life and Struggle of Wallata Petros*." *Journal of Afroasiatic Languages, History and Culture* 9 (2): 133–220.